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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine the mean differences in readiness test scores of three groups of children: (1) children whose parents volunteered to participate in a training program and received the training before their children were tested (Experimental Group); (2) children whose parents volunteered to participate in the training program and received the training subsequent to their children's testing (Control Group A); and (3) children whose parents did not volunteer to participate in the training program (Control Group B). Thirty children who were to enter kindergarten in the 1976-1977 school year and one or more of their parents were included in each of the three groups. After concluding eight 2-hour workshops sessions for the experimental group, all 90 children in the sample were administered the Utah Test of Language Development (UTLD) and four subtests of the Metropolitan Readiness Test (MRT), Level 1. Results indicated that children in the experimental group scored significantly higher than either of the control groups with respect to the combined scores of the MRT and to the scores of the UTLD. Children whose parents received training subsequent to the testing sessions did not score significantly higher on either the UTLD or the MRT than those children whose parents did not volunteer to participate in the program. (Author/MP)

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THE EFFECTS OF A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR PARENTS OF PRESCHOOLERS ON THE CHILDREN'S SCHOOL READINESS

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Early childhood education has changed since the 1960's. This change has been influenced by the findings of educators and psychologists concerning the importance of the early years on intellectual development. Researchers have found that change in intellectual structures is most rapid during the early years and that the effects of environmental encounters during the early years are most potent (Hunt, 1961; Bloom, 1964). Most educators have clearly advocated a program of intervention at some point in the preschool years (White, 1975; Gordon, 1969; Gray and Klaus, 1970). However, the age for the most effective intervention has not yet been determined. Much research has been done to determine the relationship of environmental factors and learning. Emphasis has been placed on the importance of the mother as the socializing agent (Hess and Shipman, 1969). Most researchers have been in agreement that parental involvement in the child's education is beneficial. Programs which emphasize parent-child interaction and help the mother develop teaching skills have produced greater and more lasting results than those programs directed toward the child alone (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Karnes, 1970; Adkins, 1971). Public school preschool programs have for the most part concentrated on the child's cognitive and language development in classroom settings with or without parent involvement, but little has been mentioned in the literature about parent programs emphasizing parent-child interaction in the home without the added component of preschool classes for children.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine the effectiveness of initiating a training program for parents of preschool children as a component of a school system's services. The study sought to answer the following question: What are the mean differences in readiness test scores of a group of children whose parents participate in a training program, a group of children whose parents participate in a training program subsequent to testing, and a group of children whose parents do not participate in a training program?

Procedures

This study utilized a posttest only design and analysis of variance. The accepted level of significance chosen was $p < .05$. The independent variable was the parent training program and the dependent variables were the raw scores from the Metropolitan Readiness Test, Level 1 and the raw scores from the Utah Test of Language Development.

The population came from a town in Maine of approximately 9,500 people. The sample was taken from this population of 200 parents whose children were to enter kindergarten in the 1976-1977 school year. Thirty children and one or more of their parents were included in each of the three groups: parents who volunteered to participate in the parent training program and received training prior to their children's testing, parents who volunteered to participate in the parent training program and received training subsequent to their children's testing, and parents who did not volunteer to participate in the parent training program but whose children were tested.

The parent training program was conducted by the researcher and an assistant in eight two-hour sessions throughout February and March of 1976.

For the first group of parents, the workshops were held twice weekly, once in the afternoon and once in the evening. A parent unable to attend one session was encouraged to attend the other. Two makeup sessions were held at the end of the workshop series for parents who missed one or more of the workshops.

Each of the workshops had three components. The first component was the sharing period. In this discussion and evaluation component, the parents had an opportunity to discuss their home activities with each other. This session also served as an evaluation of the previous workshop. Parents rated each workshop on a rating scale constructed to relate directly to the objectives set for each workshop.

The second component was the informational period. In the informational session of the workshop, new information was presented to parents. Slides, transparencies, and tapes were used as instructional tools to provide specific information. Demonstrations were held and parents participated in a variety of activities.

The third component was the activity period. During this session, parents used the information presented to develop games and activities to take home to work with their children. The two activities selected for each workshop were designed to teach or reinforce the skills taught in each workshop.

In considering the specific activities that were included in this workshop series, it was necessary to determine which tasks were appropriate for this particular age group. Most helpful in this direction were guidelines set by such educators as Tinker (1971), Adkins (1971), Cedoline (1972), Jecrysek, et al. (1972), Wichita State University (1972), Leeper, et al. (1974), and the New York State Education Department (1974).

The workshops were divided into eight areas, and the purposes for each are briefly discussed:

The purpose of Workshop 1, Reading to Children, was to provide parents with information and techniques which would emphasize the importance of reading to children and maximize their proficiency in handling the task. Books were vehicles throughout the workshop series for creating an atmosphere for enjoying literature and for developing readiness for later reading experiences.

The purpose of Workshop 2, Stimulating Oral Language, was to increase the parent's awareness of the importance of oral language. This workshop identified specific techniques to develop and increase the child's vocabulary and verbal fluency.

The purpose of Workshop 3, The Magic Box, was to help the parent teach the child the concepts of color, size, shape, and texture and three patterns of organization--comparison, classification, and sequence. Parents were shown how to classify, compare, and sequence objects according to size, color, shape, and texture. Emphasis was placed on the concrete level.

The purpose of Workshop 4, The Magic File Box, was the same as Workshop 3 except at this point the child would function at the semi-abstract and abstract levels.

The purpose of Workshop 5, Using the Eyes, was to teach the parent to develop the child's awareness of his or her own body: the parts, their functions, and the concept of left and right. Instruction was given in developing spatial relationships. Activities to develop skills of visual discrimination and visual memory were presented.

The purpose of Workshop 6, Using the Ears, was to help parents teach children to listen. The information provided included listening to identify common sounds in the environment, discriminating between high and low sounds,

loud and soft sounds, and listening for differences between words. Other areas emphasized in this workshop were rhyming and auditory memory.

The purpose of Workshop 7, Number Concepts, was to help the parent to be aware of the many opportunities in the home to teach the child basic readiness concepts. Information provided would help to develop a "number language," counting, a one to one correspondence, and recognition of numerals.

The purpose of Workshop 8, Writing Stories, was to teach the parent the importance of relating the child's oral language to the printed word. Parents were taught to correctly make the upper and lower case letters so that they could write the words, sentences, and stories their children dictate. However, they were cautioned not to teach or urge their children to write the letters until they have had many experiences with pencils and crayons.

After the completion of the workshop series for the experimental group, all ninety children in the sample were administered the Utah Test of Language Development and four subtests of the Metropolitan Readiness Test, Level 1. The total scores of these two testings were used as dependent variables. The data resulting from the testing were treated statistically by analysis of variance.

Findings

1. Children in the Experimental group scored significantly higher than either of the Control groups with respect to the combined scores of the Metropolitan Readiness Test.

2. Children in the Experimental group scored significantly higher than either of the Control groups with respect to the scores of the Utah Test of Language Development.

3. Children whose parents received training subsequent to the testing sessions did not score significantly higher on either the Utah Test of Language Development or the Metropolitan Readiness Test than those children whose parents did not volunteer to participate in the program.

Conclusions

The findings of this study seem to indicate that the following conclusions be drawn:

1. The parent training program did significantly affect the readiness scores of the Experimental group. Children in the Experimental group scored significantly higher than either of the Control groups with respect to the scores of the Metropolitan Readiness Test.

2. The parent training program did significantly affect the language readiness scores of the Experimental group. Children in the Experimental group scored significantly higher than either of the Control groups with respect to the scores of the Utah Test of Language Development.

3. Children whose parents received training subsequent to the testing sessions did not score significantly higher on either the Utah Test of Language Development or the Metropolitan Readiness Test than those children whose parents did not volunteer to participate in the program.

4. The cognitive and language skills emphasized in the parent training program are skills that parents can effectively teach children at home through games and activities.

5. Since the Experimental group of children achieved significantly higher scores than the two control groups, the parent training program was effective in providing parents with techniques to teach their children the

skills assessed by the Utah Test of Language Development and the Metropolitan Readiness Test.

6. The parent training program emphasizing parent-child interaction in the home instead of the usual preschool classes for children did positively affect the readiness scores of children whose parents participated.

7. The local school system, by initiating a training program for parents, was successful in positively affecting the readiness scores of a group of children whose parents participated.

Implications

The significantly higher scores of the children whose parents participated in the parent training program prior to testing support research findings that children whose parents participate in preschool programs make greater gains in readiness scores than those children whose parents do not participate. Since the parent training program did affect the readiness scores of the Experimental group, other educators considering similar programs may find it helpful to study the objectives established for the program, the language and cognitive skills taught, and the teaching procedures used in this study.

The parent training program in this study emphasized providing parents with information, teaching skills, and encouraging parent-child interaction in verbal and cognitive tasks. Workshop evaluations indicated that parents found the information provided in the workshops to be of "some value" to "much value." In every workshop, the parents gave the items relating to the parent-child home activities the highest rating. Parents perceived that the children showed much interest in the activities presented at home. These perceptions support research findings that parent-child interaction centering

around a cognitive activity is a major factor in successful preschool programs. Educators concerned with establishing preschool programs should consider the importance of actively involving parents in the programs.

In viewing the superior readiness scores of the Experimental group in the study, it is necessary to take into consideration the possibility that this superiority may be temporary. Research has indicated that many intervention programs centering on the child alone have generally succeeded in producing only short-term gains. However, there is some evidence that programs emphasizing parent-child interaction in the home have had later impact on the child in the school setting. Since parent evaluations indicated that parent-child interaction was a significant factor in this study, it is possible that continued interaction in the home will help to sustain the superiority of the Experimental group in the school setting.

When viewing the superior readiness scores of the Experimental group, it is also necessary to consider the sampling procedures used in this study. Although both the Experimental group and the Control 1 group volunteered to participate in the parent training program, only the Experimental group of parents was actually selected to participate in the first series of workshops prior to testing. Those parents who were selected to participate first may have been highly motivated to work with their children at home through the suggested games and activities in an effort to promote higher scores on their children's readiness tests. The Control 1 group parents did not have the stimulation of participating in the training program prior to testing and may have been less motivated to work with their children at home. Since the motivation factor of actual involvement in the child's educational process appears to be a significant factor in parent intervention programs, researchers should consider the motivation factor in designing studies.

The volunteering factor must also be considered. It may be that some parents in the non-volunteering group were unwilling to participate in a parent training program; but other factors must be considered, e.g., illness, transportation difficulties, workshifts. In future studies, it may be important to consider the factors involved when parents do not volunteer to participate in programs and to explore ways of enlisting greater parental cooperation in participating in preschool programs.

The Letter Recognition Subtest was the only one where the scores of the Experimental Group were significantly higher than those of both of the Control groups. It may be that parents were generally more aware of the necessity of teaching letter recognition than other skills, e.g., visual matching, rhyming. Perhaps programs such as Sesame Street and Electric Company have helped to emphasize the importance of letter knowledge. It may be necessary to consider alternatives to help parents become better aware of cognitive and language tasks that may be developed at home. One possibility is to conduct programs similar to the parent training program in this study, but other alternatives need to be explored.

The parent evaluations and comments were helpful in terms of providing feedback and direction for other workshops. The average time the parents spent working with their children was thirty minutes per day, and most parents indicated that the workshops had helped them to be aware of the many teaching opportunities in the home to develop readiness skills. The parent evaluations of the individual workshops did not reveal any significant differences in the mean ratings of the workshops. All workshops were rated from "some help" to "much help" by the parents. It may be that the evaluation procedure needs to be refined in an effort to produce more discriminating results and to reduce the existing problem of dealing with rating scales where there is a tendency to rate items from the middle to the upper end.

Several parents mentioned the fact that the information, techniques, and activities provided in the workshops would be of great benefit in teaching readiness skills to younger siblings as well as to their four and five year olds. Their comments support research findings that the benefits of parent intervention programs focusing on the parent's role with the child extend to the younger siblings. These findings have implications for further research. It may be helpful to follow the progress of the younger siblings of the children in a study of this type to determine whether the siblings of an experimental group of children exhibit higher readiness scores than siblings of a control group of children.

The parent training program did produce positive effects with respect to the readiness scores of the four and five year old children whose parents participated in the training program for eight weeks prior to testing. On the basis of these findings, the local school system did succeed in effecting higher readiness scores of a group of preschool children by conducting a training program for their parents. These findings may have implications for other school systems concerned with parent involvement as an aid to preschool children's school readiness. Alternatives to the model in this study might be explored, e.g., larger sample, disadvantaged sample, variation of program for experimental and control groups, less formal setting.

Recommendations for Further Research

The following suggestions are offered for further research:

1. In this study, parents were given eight weeks to teach their children the skills presented in the workshops. For some children a longer period of time may be necessary for them to be ready for a specific skill; for some children eight weeks may be adequate; and for others, eight weeks may be

too lengthy. Educators might explore the effects of varying the length of time of the training sessions to meet the individual needs of parents and children.

2. Since the duration of the training program has obvious financial implications for school system, educators should explore the effects on readiness of varying the length of time of the training sessions.

3. The sample in this study of ninety was relatively small and was based on a total population of children and parents from a town in Maine. The treatment of a larger group of parents from other types of communities might result in different findings. Educators should explore the effects of replicating this study with a larger sample of parents or in a different type of community.

4. The parent training sessions in this study were held in a school setting. It is suggested that educators explore the effects of providing other types of settings, which may provide a less formal atmosphere, e.g., community halls, libraries, neighborhood schools, parents' homes.

5. There was no assurance that parents would continue with the activities in the home once the training sessions were completed. It is suggested that educators explore the effects of building a maintenance component into the total program where parents meet to discuss common problems.

6. Early intervention programs may produce only short term gains. A follow up study should be undertaken to determine whether children continue to maintain their lead in cognitive and language readiness after the termination of the program.

7. In this study, emphasis was placed on cognitive and language development. However, social and emotional development are also essential components of readiness and strongly affect the child's cognitive development. It is suggested that educators explore the effects of including in the training

program more aspects of social and emotional readiness than were emphasized in this study.

8. In view of the research findings indicating that intervention should begin well before the age of four, it is suggested that researchers explore the effect of extending a parent training program. Studies should be undertaken to determine the effects of a program on younger children and siblings of the target group.

9. It is further recommended that school systems explore the effects of implementing child development and parenthood courses for high school students which would provide them with information on child development as well as an opportunity to work with children in the home with a variety of language and cognitive activities.